

Garrison Command: The First 90 Days

By Retired Colonel Charles D. Allen

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About this time of year, our U. S. Army War College (USAWC) students have mapped out the academic year in preparation for their assignments after graduation. The students naturally seek to take maximum advantage of the limited time for reflection that is available this year. Across the Army there are several senior service college students who will assume brigade-level command in the summer of 2009 and a handful of them will be garrison commanders – with a similar number of IMCOM civilians who are aspiring deputies to garrison commanders (DGCs).

In reviewing the Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management (ACSIM) Web site, one notes that IMCOM is responsible for approximately 110 installations. And, as of October 2008, there were nearly 80 centrally-selected garrison commands (54 colonel-level and 24 lieutenant colonel-level, but these numbers are subject to change). Given the nominal command tour is two to three years for lieutenant colonels and three years for colonels, we can expect at a minimum of 30 command transitions during each fiscal year.

This article offers suggestions on preparation to assume command and actions for the first 90 days in command.

Why the first 90 days? This timeframe is not a new construction. Our American presidents are judged on their accomplishments in the first 100 days as they set the agenda for the new administration. This standard was set with Franklin D. Roosevelt

assuming office in following the Great Depression with his New Deal and acknowledged by President Kennedy as he took the oath of office in 1961.

Within the U.S. Army, we require a minimum of 90 days before an officer can be rated in a duty position. As a case in point, the Army has mandated that company commanders conduct a Command Climate Survey within the first 90 days to “assess and improve...the unit” and “to use the assessment information to develop [corrective] action plans” (U.S. Department of Army, 1998). This timeframe acknowledges that a leader must transition into command, make an initial assessment of the unit or organization, and then set the direction for it to follow during the commander’s tenure. While the Army has provided deploying battalion and brigade commanders with a handbook to “assist them with identifying those issues that most effect [sic] actions in the first 100 days of combat, the most dangerous and uncertain period” (Hileman, 2008), such an offering of collected information is not available to incoming garrison commanders.

Organizational researcher, Michael Watkins, noted that it generally takes business executives six months before they learn and know enough to add value to their organizations. Watkins asserted that the first 90 days are critical in gathering information and the second 90 days result in the formulation of the organizational strategy and setting the agenda (Watkins, 2003). For our transitioning U.S. Army garrison commanders, the following

framework may be useful: Preparing for Command, Assuming Command, Learning the Command, and Setting and Executing the Strategy.

Preparing for Command

Incoming commanders are expected to do their homework. It is essential for them to gather information from several sources. This process aligns with the Army philosophy for leader development covered in three domains: institutional,



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operational assignments and self-development. USAWC provides a useful primer on installation mission, functions and organization in the chapter, "Installation Command and Management" (Allen, 2007). The institutional policies, current programs and initiatives, and emerging concerns can be quickly discerned by visiting the ASCIM and IMCOM Web sites. Another source for information is the Army Knowledge Online (AKO) Knowledge Center for IMCOM that posts the latest briefings from commander conferences and status reports from staff proponents on key areas of interest.

Through AKO blogs and discussion threads, installation management professionals can also share the nagging issues and concerns that capture their attention and energy. The deputy commanding general of IMCOM has taken a more direct approach by e-mailing his DCG Bi-Weekly Update to region directors, commanders, and staff for special areas of emphasis. A more traditional source is represented by this publication, The U.S. Army Journal of Installation Management, which presents views of IMCOM leadership and highlights the good work of the installations and regions in executing the IMCOM mission and strategies.

Given that garrison command is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is unlikely that a lieutenant colonel would have experience in garrison organizations in previous operational assignments. Subsequently, the number of colonels who were lieutenant colonel-level garrison commanders is small. It is sensible for future commanders to seek out those officers with garrison command experience as well as IMCOM civilians and engage in dialogue to learn from them. Over the past few years, several USAWC students have approached me with that intent. Each officer should realize that his present duty station has a commander and installation staff with a wealth of knowledge on garrison business. While each installation has unique character, there are common challenges with housing, public works, emergency services, morale, welfare and recreation quality-of-life programs, etc., that can be discussed with experienced personnel.

The Army has a well-defined institutional process for command-selected officers – all who will attend the Pre-Command Course (PCC) at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. A recent PCC requirement has those officer attendees participating in

the Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (MSAF) that includes a 360-degree assessment by subordinates, peers and supervisors related to Field Manual 6-22, Army Leadership, leader competencies (U.S. Department of the Army, 2006). This portfolio is confidential and solely for developmental purposes. It provides many officers their first assessment outside of the traditional officer evaluation report (OER). A feedback session is conducted by a qualified counselor to discuss specific leader behaviors on areas of strength and potential areas for improvement in preparation for command. The product of the assessment and counseling is an individual development plan that the commander will use to monitor progress.

While traditional unit commanders also attend branch-sponsored courses, garrison personnel attend the Garrison Pre-Command Course (GPC) for four weeks at the Army Management Staff College, Fort Belvoir, Va. Both groups of commanders may have the opportunity to attend the Senior Officer Legal Orientation (SOLO) course at the Judge Advocate General school in Charlotte, Va. During each of these institutional opportunities, garrison commanders hear the latest and greatest information, build a list of reference materials (i.e., Department of Defense and Department of Army publications, best practices from public administration and city managers, and business literature), and, potentially most important, develop a network of contacts with experts and colleagues in installation management.

The Army's institutional education programs (PCC and GPC) serve to highlight the complexity and breadth of installation management. These programs make it abundantly clear to incoming commanders that they



didn't know what they didn't know about garrison command. The greatest challenge for commanders as new leaders is to "come to terms with their own lack of expertise and wisdom" (Schein, 2004) in garrison environments.

It is normal to be both excited and anxious about the new command. Watkins identified that incoming executives facing transition have paradoxical emotions of anticipation and anxiety. There is the opportunity to meet new challenges and the potential to have a positive impact that is in contrast with the anxiety of venturing into a distinctly new position. New leaders also feel vulnerable and out of their comfort zone when they realize how steep the learning curve will be to grasp the details of the new organization. The prudent leader will begin to gather as much information as possible about the new command.

One should reasonably assume that the sitting commander will be eager to set up the successor for success, so do not be concerned about making initial contact. I was pleasantly surprised upon receiving a videotape on which the then-current commander introduced himself and the garrison staff and provided the latest set of command briefings and status reports. This was a best practice that I "paid forward." You should expect the commander to assign a point of contact to assist in your transition. The commander can share the hottest topics and projects facing the installation as well as provide key documents for review. This collection of information will allow you to prudently prepare for GPC attendance and to focus on subject matter in the course that has greater salience for the installation.

Realize that until you are handed

the unit colors and cell phone, he or she has the burden and responsibility of command. Do not presume to understand the challenges faced by the commander and do not encroach – your time will come. You, however, should feel comfortable in asking for information about the command that it is willing to share. Occasional telephone calls, e-mails, or desktop video teleconferences may be appropriate communication methods to develop the connection that will ease the transition into command.

Assuming Command:

Be Brief, Be Brilliant and Be Gone

When the change of command date approaches, keep in mind the three B's – Be Brief, Be Brilliant and Be Gone. The change of command ceremony rightfully showcases the outgoing commander who has experienced blood, sweat, and tears along with great accomplishment in completing a very demanding assignment. Keep your comments short and concise; reinforce that you understand and accept the challenge of the command; and be gracious to your predecessor. Do not announce any major changes and remember something from your assumption of company command, "All standing orders and policies remain in effect." Generally, there will be a receiving line for the outgoing commander so you should quickly depart the area for your own welcoming reception.

During the reception, you will meet and greet the key stakeholders for the installation. Your new staff – the command team of the command sergeant major and deputy to the garrison commander with the directorate heads – will be working very hard to impress you and the guests. You will undoubtedly meet the senior commander, tenant commanders, support agency heads, IMCOM region staff, and contractors – all who have a vested

interest in the community. This event will also be your first exposure to those people external to garrison operations – local government, civic and business leaders who are part of the community in which the installation resides. For those garrisons that are outside of the continental United States (OCONUS), you may also meet host nation personnel from the local and regional governments.

It is essential to quickly establish and develop relationships with the key stakeholders who will be instrumental to conducting the business of the installation. You will typically share your command philosophy during the initial meetings with the garrison staff and workforce. It is equally important to set similar foundations of expectation and trust with others outside of the direct chain of command through a series of scheduled meetings and to seize impromptu opportunities to interact. Ask the current garrison commander, the deputy and the senior commander who they consider as the high priority contacts and make it a point to meet them. These initial encounters will help you learn about the command and those that it serves.

Learning the Command

It is necessary for the new garrison commander to take stock of the installation in several areas. Understanding the external environment, assessing the existing organizational culture, and knowing the assigned missions and current strategies are critical for leadership of any enterprise. In conducting this organizational diagnosis, the GC will learn several important things about the command that will inform judgment on key items of strategy, people, and during times of crises (Allen, 2008).

Culture and Climate

One of the first things that a GC should do is to assess the culture that exists at the installation. Just walking through the directorates, meeting with installation tenants, and talking with family members on post will give the GC a feeling of how the garrison staff goes about day-to-day activities. Culture has many definitions but we can see it manifested in the patterns of behavior and it is reflective of basic assumptions of how things are really done (Schein, 2004). The GC can expect that the installation strategic plan will have mission and vision statements along with a list of values that are published for internal direction and external consumption. While IMCOM has aligned with the seven Army values, specific garrison value statements may have different words but the underlying concepts are consistent.

What we hope for at installations is a culture of respect and service to others as well as stewardship of resources that is aligned with published and espoused values. There, however, may be evidence to the contrary. What is typically found in organizations is a gap between what we say “should be” and “what is” – that gap can hinder the performance of the garrison mission, both externally and internally. Reviewing the customer comment cards and addressing issues at an installation town hall meeting may reveal indications if such gaps exist with customers. While the performance metrics for services can be quantitatively captured with IMCOM’s newly implemented Customer Service Assessment (Nahrwold & Valenzuela, Winter 2008), it is important that the GC understand how the installation is perceived by its external constituents and the corporate leaders of tenant units. IMCOM has recognized the

importance of culture and has established under the strategic goal of leadership a supporting objective to “Further develop the organizational culture such that IMCOM becomes the employer of choice.” (U.S. Army Installation Management Command, 2008). While culture may endure and take significant effort to influence or change, the command climate is much more malleable. This may be why the Army directs that the climate survey be completed within the first 90 days. A company commander and her team can have a direct and immediate influence on the perception of unit members with day-to-day contact and actions (U.S. Department of the Army, 1986 and 2008). The same is true for garrison command where the workforce climate may be characterized by a sigh of relief or one of anxiety after the first staff meeting with the new commander.

As with culture, the commander has to assess whether the existing climate is supportive of the organizational goals and performance of its mission. If not, then action must be taken. With a predominantly civilian workforce, the number of open Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) cases and turnover rates may offer insights on how people perceive they are treated. The EEO office and Office of the Inspector General are traditional resources to look for potential problem areas and to examine trends in workforce complaints. A valuable tool to determine the command climate within the civilian workforce is the Organizational Self-Assessment (OSA). Derived from the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence, the OSA has been mandated by IMCOM to “get some good feedback from the workforce on how they perceive the organization as a whole” (Cutshaw, 2007).

Key Decisions, Key Processes, Key People

The incoming GC must clearly understand and be able to communicate the IMCOM responsibilities in support of the senior commander for the installation and its tenants. This is an ongoing tension at the institutional level (e.g., Department of the Army Staff and Army commands) and as such, will continue to be a recurring topic of discussion at the local installation. The GC must know where his decision authority lies and be able to collaborate across organizational boundaries to support the greater community. This is uniquely true for OCONUS installations where U.S. Army garrisons may have a wartime mission set as well as standard installation support operations.

In addition to knowing the command responsibilities, the GC must identify the internal processes for installation support operations. While the garrison organization chart outlines functional responsibilities, those must be enabled by key processes for developing strategies, establishing priorities, resourcing with personnel and funding, and executing programs and budgets — hence, facilitating prudent and effective decision making. The GC must ensure that internal processes are aligned with the IMCOM strategic processes and initiatives in support of the greater enterprise.

Lastly, the commander should recognize talents of those on the garrison staff. One sitting commander has referred to a special group as “the middle of the night” team — those to call and gather when situations or crises arise that require thoughtful attention and reasoned action. The commander must also realize that there are key people outside of garrison staff that can be of great assistance.



For example, the chief of staff of the senior commander may be invaluable in gaining consensus and coordinating with other tenant commanders for a major event on the installation. The GC will be most effective when he or she can build and maintain a high-performing team within the garrison workforce that can also partner with the external stakeholders to accomplish common goals.

Setting and Executing the Strategy

This article has presented recommendations to help an incoming garrison leader make the most of the first 90 days in command. The commander should prepare for the command by gathering information on IMCOM policies and strategies from various sources while learning directly from those with garrison experience. The leader should take full advantage of the institutional leader development programs (e.g., PCC and GPC) to learn about garrison operations, establish a personal network of installation professionals, and contact the command to begin the transition.

Upon assuming command, the GC should develop relationships with the garrison staff and community members who are the constituents and key stakeholders. To learn the command effectively, the GC should conduct an organizational diagnosis to assess the culture and command climate. This can be accomplished by using the existing IMCOM tools of the organizational self-assessment and the customer service assessment that also provide measures of performance against IMCOM corporate standards. A commander who is self-aware and appreciative of the many talents of the installation team is postured for success in the first 90 days and beyond.

IMCOM has directed the development of strategic plans at installations so all installations have a formal analysis of organizational strengths and weaknesses, as well as the external opportunities and challenges. The information gained during this initial period of command will allow the GC to determine what should remain and what should change in installation support plans and operations. These actions in the first 90 days support the strategic planning process of affirming the vision, mission, and core capabilities of the garrison. The knowledge gained in this period will serve as the foundation for setting the local strategic agenda for the tenure of commander in order to execute the IMCOM strategic priorities.

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OBJECTIVES



FIRST 30 DAYS

- Meet with key people I support—all general officers, other commanders, senior commander unit staff, organizations on post and union president. Meet with any local officials I didn't meet during "outside the gate transition training."
- Form an initial assessment of the organization
- How it interacts with customers
- How it aligns strategy, organization and capabilities
- Begin to identify who are the key power coalitions
- ID Key priorities
- Hold half- to full-day off site and go over what I learned
- Follow up with workforce to go over what I have learned
- Plan for next 30 days



FIRST 60 DAYS

- Develop the way ahead
- Pick an early win that can be delivered by January
- Force protection assessment complete
- Executing weekly brown bags with different groups
- Town hall meeting scheduled (conduct quarterly)



FIRST 90 DAYS

- Walk the grounds and meet (or be visible) to every employee
- Consensus on a garrison "strategic agenda"
- Quarterly all hands meeting